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*In Times of Empire:  
Theological Issues from the 2004  
General Council of the World Alliance  
of Reformed Churches*

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ABSTRACT - Organised ecumenism remains a relevant entry point for discussions on reshaping Protestantism in a global context. Originally a Presbyterian and Reformed confessional organisation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches gathers different church families marked by the Swiss Reformation and committed to the search for the visible unity of Christian churches. It held its 24<sup>th</sup> General Council in Accra, Ghana in July 2004. This paper seeks to facilitate theological discernment of its main results.

**I. What is going on in Seoul, São Paulo,  
and Tegucigalpa**

1. As I begin to write this text, the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia, is in Seoul addressing an ecumenical forum gathering some two hundred church and Korean ecumenical leaders, most of them Protestants. What is Kobia saying to Korean ecumenical Protestants? That on the one hand European Protestantism, “a main pillar of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ecumenical movement in general and WCC in particular” has begun to

decline and, on the other hand, that “the centre of gravity of Christianity is shifting to the global South”. Kobia goes on to argue that these trends will “impact and influence ecumenism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.

2. In which ways? Scholarship of theologians from the South “will need to be taken more seriously and be allowed to impact ecumenical thinking”; historical Christian churches “are confronted with a multitude of unfamiliar and uncultivated relationships among the emerging Pentecostal and charismatic communities which are having a strong influence on their (...) members and forms of worship”; the programmatic activities that have characterised conciliar ecumenism “are likely to decline”; ecumenism in the new century “will have to take into account the growing phenomena of multifaith living”; it will inevitably display a “life-centred vision”, face the challenge of “ecumenical formation”, respond to “a yearning for spirituality among youth and old alike” and grapple with the following questions: ecumenism as a movement versus its institutional expression; the implications of broadening the ecumenical fellowship, and the relationship between “commitment to ecumenical and to denominational/confessional structures”. Kobia concludes that the above trends point to a major challenge to ecumenism today: “will ‘movement’ as a concept and praxis continue to characterize ecumenism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century or will the ecumenical emphasis on spiritual gifts most likely serve as the basis for the development of a contemporary ecumenical praxis?”<sup>1</sup>

3. As I begin to write this text, the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), a mainline Protestant regional ecumenical organisation, has just held in São Paulo, Brazil, a continental consultation, with some 80 representatives from 22 Latin American countries, on the relationship between the integration of Latin American countries and societies into the global market and human dignity. Participants analysed the issue from the economic, political and

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<sup>1</sup> S. Kobia, “New vision and challenges to ecumenism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – NCC Korea 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration”, [www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/press\\_corner/kobia-korea.html](http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/press_corner/kobia-korea.html), 23/08/2004.

theological perspectives. The focus of the consultation was the role Latin American Protestant churches might play to bring about equality and social justice in a regional context marked by poverty, the debt crisis and now the challenge of a subordinated integration into the regional and global market. The consultation intended to open up a dialogue between Protestant churches and political sectors and to promote biblical and theological reflection on this issue with a view to facilitate pastoral, missional and liturgical action by CLAI member churches like, for instance, empowering local agents of social transformation<sup>2</sup>.

4.As I begin to write this text, AIPRAL – the World Alliance of Reformed Churches area council in Latin America – has just held in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, a consultation on Reformed identity and mission in Central America today. Participants identified three “fundamental challenges” to the mission of Reformed Churches in Central America today: to help people in their most immediate needs and in their struggle for their right to life; to resist the different expressions of the so-called “prosperity theology” and, thirdly, to rediscover the church’s prophetic ministry beyond the modern sheer distinction between faith and politics. They reviewed the “Reformed theological basis of mission” and sought to enlarge the biblical ground of mission and the renewal of Reformed worship with a view to mission in Latin American<sup>3</sup>.

## II. The World Alliance General Council in Accra and the early method of liberation theologies

5.Kobia’s address on the future of the ecumenical movement as it experiences the pains of the decline of European Protestantism and the perplexities of Christian

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<sup>2</sup> “Inauguran Consulta Continental sobre Integración del Mercado y Dignidad Humana”, “Modelos de integração econômica não enfatizam dignidade humana”, “Templos abrigam escolas e telecentros no Chile”, [www.alcnoticias.org/](http://www.alcnoticias.org/), 20/08/04, 21/08/04, 23/08/04.

<sup>3</sup> “En Honduras será tercer y último Encuentro sobre Identidad Reformada”, “Aipral analiza desafíos à missão”, [www.alcnoticias.org/](http://www.alcnoticias.org/), 10/07/04, 23/08/04.

(post-Protestant?) expansion in the “global South”, the CLAI consultation on the role Protestant churches are called to play in Latin American countries virtually compelled to join the All Americas Free Trade Area and the AIPRAL consultation on the Reformed identity of Central American churches and its implications for the renewal of their witness today are taking place almost at the same time we meet to discuss the ambitious theme “Reshaping Protestantism in a Global Context”. More: all of them deal with different faces of the “global context” and address, in a rather praxis-oriented way, the Protestantism we are trying to “reshape”. Even more: all of them have to do with conciliar based efforts of reconstruction within Protestantism.

6.It is precisely to state a case for the importance of churches’ common life and witness today as a possible entry point to discussions on “Reshaping Protestantism in a Global Context” that I would like to invite you to explore the theological potential of the General council that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) held in Accra, Ghana, July 30<sup>th</sup> to August 12, 2004. Under the umbrella theme “That All may have Life in Fullness”, the WARC General Council gathered in different capacities some 900 people from almost 200 Warc member churches in almost 100 countries.

7.In the framework of Bible study and worship rooted in the local Christian spirituality, the Warc General Council was conceived as a journey in three stages that remind (stereotyped descriptions of) the method of Latin American liberation theologies of the 1970s and 1980s. The first stage - let us call it “analysing our context” –, was dominant in the programme of the first five days (July 30 to August 3). It was dedicated to wrestling with contemporary threats to life in the world, beyond the visible church borders. The first address of the keynote event was given by a non-Christian woman, the well-known Indian physicist and social activist Vandana Shiva<sup>4</sup>; Council delegates were asked to

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<sup>4</sup> V. Shiva, “Earth Democracy, Living Democracy – Building peace, sustainability and justice from within a non-sustainable, violent and unjust world order”, General Council document 01-e, unpublished.

contextually address and engage in group work on the following issues: environment, gender justice, economic justice, inclusiveness and participation, peace, healing, and diversity. This first stage culminated in a spiritual pilgrimage to the Cape Coast and Elmina Slave Dungeons, two former “no return” sites of the slave trade from where thousands of African captured slaves were shipped to Western countries.

8. In the second stage, dominant in the programme of the following three days (August 4 to 7) – let us call it “interpreting our faith in response to our analysis” –, participants sought to relate the world voices on threats to life to the General Council theme “That All may have Life in Fullness” and draw implications for three aspects of the life and witness of WARC member churches: mission renewal, churches “covenanting” for justice, and spirituality.

9. In the third and final stage of the journey, dominant in the last four days of the General Council (August 9 to 12) – let us call it “moving to conscious common action” –, participants sought to indicate general practical directions for the future work of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in the light of the outcomes of the two previous stages.

10. In the following sections of this paper I will focus on the results of the second stage of the WARC general council. As I have just indicated, this was the moment in which participants sought to articulate the analysis of the global context with insights gained from the council theme “that all may have life in fullness” and draw implications for three aspects church life today: mission renewal, the challenge to faith represented by economic injustice and environmental degradation, and spirituality.

### III. Mission renewal in times of Empire

11. Facilitated by stories of mission renewal from different regions, by a paper on “Mission Renewal in the Context of

Globalization”, by Philip Wickeri<sup>5</sup>, and by two panels on “The God of Covenant was in Jesus of Nazareth: Good-News, Empire and the household of Life” and “The People of God among all God’s People: Mission, Secularisation, Religious Pluralism and New Challenges to Christian Unity”, the Section on mission produced a short report whose main content can be summarised in the following five points<sup>6</sup> and whose structure is very similar to that of the General Council itself, presented above as a journey in three stages: analysing our context, interpreting our faith in response to our analysis, moving to common action in light of both.

12.First: Empire, rather than globalisation, is the adequate term to describe today’s threats to life in fullness and the new context of Christian mission. We define Empire, says the document, “as the convergence of economic, political, cultural and military interests that constitute a system of domination in which benefits are forced to flow from the weak to the powerful. Centred in the last remaining superpower yet spread all over the world, Empire crosses all boundaries, reconstructs identities, subverts cultures, overcomes nation states, and challenges religious communities”<sup>7</sup>.

13.Second: Mission “is embodied in the life of the people of God among all God’s peoples, bearing witness to Jesus Christ in the life of the Holy Spirit”. It expresses itself in a variety of missiologies. Missiologies of life are a continuation of the mission of Jesus in announcing God’s reign. Jesus, says the document making use of the traditional Reformed *munus triplex* language, “was a prophet, who resisted Empire and domination of every kind, a priest who comforted those who were powerless and broken, impoverished and marginalized, a King who became a Servant who saw the other side of Empire”. The mission of Jesus must include “a continuing emphasis on evangelism and evangelisation”. It is related “to a range of images centring on mission in the

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<sup>5</sup> P. Wickeri, “Mission Renewal in the Context of Globalisation”, Document General Council 15-e, 6 pp.

<sup>6</sup> “Mission Section Plenary Report”, Document General Council 19-e, 3 pp.

<sup>7</sup> “Mission Section...”, par. 1.1.

household of life”. It emphasizes “healing and wholeness in our divided and broken world”<sup>8</sup>.

14.Third: Mission in Christian unity today requires engagement with Pentecost and Pentecostalism. Pentecost, says the document, “is a gift and a calling of the whole church. We need to develop further what this means for theologies of the spirit that can inspire new ways of doing mission in various contexts”. There is much we can learn from the Pentecostal movement. “For example, their emphasis on the Holy Spirit in mission, participatory forms of worship, and lay leadership can all contribute to our own life of worship and mission”. However, some Pentecostal mission practices “are problematic for our churches”. For example, “we have serious differences on such issues as proselytism, gender justice, and teachings about a gospel of prosperity”<sup>9</sup>.

15.Fourth: Mission in times of Empire and clash-of-civilisations-talk requires “new forms of inter-religious engagement to address issues of inter-religious conflict”. Reformed churches “have not developed an adequate approach to religious plurality”. Christians “are disciples of Jesus who are the people of God among all God’s peoples (...). In our encounter with people of other faiths, we witness to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, as we learn from and listen to others’ unique religious teachings”<sup>10</sup>.

16.Finally: our common calling to mission moves us “to pray that we might grow into fuller communion with one another” as Warc member churches. This includes partnership in mission. We are required to ask ourselves whether “our mission relations are fair and effective, whether they are unilateral or multilateral, whether they are captive to the powers of this world or sharing the power of love”. Our new missiologies must be reflected “in the structural relationships we maintain with one another as churches. We therefore call on our churches to prayerfully

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., par. 2.1 to 2.5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., par. 3.1 to 3.5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., par. 4.1., 4.2., 4.3.

consider and carefully discuss what it might mean to see the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as a fellowship of churches covenanting together in mission, developing in dialogue with one another new missiologies of life, and exploring together new patterns of sharing for our common calling”<sup>11</sup>.

#### IV Confessing the faith in times of Empire

17.The outcome of the Covenant Section was a rather controversial document called “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth”. Its structure reminds that of the General Council itself (section II of this paper) and that of the Mission statement I have just described: It starts by “Reading the signs of the times”, what I have called above “analysing our situation”; it moves then to a “Confession of Faith in the Face of Economic Injustice and Ecological Destruction”, what I have called above “interpreting our faith in response to our analysis”, it concludes with a call to member churches to covenant for justice, what I have called above “acting together in light of both”.

18.Which are the signs of the times? We live, says the document, “in a scandalous world that denies God’s call to life for all. The annual income of the richest 1% is equal to that of the poorest 57%, and 24,000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition”. The policy of unlimited growth among industrialised countries and the drive for profit of transnational corporations “have plundered the earth and severely damaged the environment”. This crisis “is directly related to the development of neoliberal economic globalization”. This is an ideology that claims “to be without alternative, demanding an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and creation”. It makes the false promise “that it can save the world through the creation of wealth and prosperity, claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance, which amounts to idolatry”. The current world

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., par. 5.1., 5.2., 5.4.



disorder is defended by empire, that means, “the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests”<sup>12</sup>.

19. We believe, write the General Council delegates, “that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalisation”<sup>13</sup>. They move, therefore, to an act of confession of the faith. Originally drafted by a remarkable Reformed theologian issued from the church and theological struggle against apartheid that culminated in the 1982 Belhar Confession, the Accra Confession was framed in a way that reminds the 1934 Barmen Declaration and The Belhar Confession itself, its biblically based faith statements being followed by a *wir verwerfen* that does not allow for a *tertium*. This, for some, does not go without suggesting a controversial analogy between the ideology leading to the adoption of the Aryan Paragraph and the neoliberal ideology or, conversely, between the *Kirchenkampf* and the struggle against economic globalisation.

20. The gravity centre of the Accra Confession is the affirmation, made in its second article, that Christians are called To be “partners in the creation and redemption of the world”<sup>14</sup>. The Accra confession was therefore made necessary by the awareness that, in the context of the present world economic order, of the present management of the household of life, a wide range of different local situations converge in the need for a new, critical understanding of human stewardship within the earth community.

21. The Accra Confession seeks therefore to correct an anthropocentric understanding of stewardship that has often been associated with the domination of nature and the domination of other peoples conceived as (modern European) progress. In this sense it seems to depart from

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<sup>12</sup> “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth”, Document General Council 28-e, par. 7-11.

<sup>13</sup> “Covenanting for Justice...”, par. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., par. 16.

the theology of some early Reformed confessions which understood creation as “mirror of God’s goodness” and, by the same virtue, as oriented toward human beings, destined to “the service of mankind” or to the “profit (*utilitas*), and use (*usus*) of man”<sup>15</sup>.

22. The twenty articles of the Accra Confession accomplish three main movements. The first one states the case for a confession and provides a trinitarian framework for the call to a new stewardship. We believe in God “Creator and Sustainer of all life” and live “under the promise that Jesus Christ came so that all might have life in fullness”. Guided and upheld by the Holy Spirit, “we open ourselves to the reality of our world”. God calls us to be “partners in the creation and redemption of the world”.

23. The second part articulates several biblical affirmations about God with critical public stewardship, namely, the rejection of systemic and cultural dimensions of contemporary economic globalisation. The affirmation that God is sovereign over all creation leads to the rejection of “the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism” and any other economic system “which defy God’s covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life”. The affirmation of God’s covenant “with all of creation”, which is “an economy of grace for the household of all of creation” leads to the rejection of the “culture of rampant consumerism”. The belief that “any economy of the household of life (...) is accountable to God” leads to the rejection of “the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God’s creation”. In a world “of corruption, exploitation, and greed”, the God who is a God of justice is in a special way “the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged, and the abused” who calls “for just relationships with all creation”. This leads to the rejection of “any ideology or economic regime that puts

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<sup>15</sup> J. Rohls, *Reformed Confessions – Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, Louisville, Westminster- John Knox, 1998, p. 57, 64.

profits before people, does not care for all creation, and privatises those gifts of God meant for all”.

24. Based on who God is and what God does for the world, the last part develops the ecclesial implications of the initial insight on “partners in the creation and redemption of the world” through a series of church related articles mostly introduced by the formula “we believe that God calls us...”. It focuses on the life and witness of the Christian community whose call to be “partners in the creation and the redemption of the world” is lived as radical a non-conformism shared with a growing number of people and social movements from different countries, cultures, cultures and religions.

25. We are called “to stand with those who are victims of injustice” therefore we reject “any theology that claims that God is only with the rich and that poverty is the fault of the poor”. We are called “to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ”, therefore we reject “any church practice or teaching which excludes the poor and the care for creation from its mission”. God calls “men, women and children from every place together, rich and poor, to uphold the unity of the church and its mission”, therefore we reject “any attempt in the life of the church to separate justice and unity”. We are also called in the Spirit “to account for the hope that is within us through Jesus Christ”. In obedience to Jesus Christ, we believe that “the church is called to confess, witness and act, even though the authorities and human law might forbid them, and punishment and suffering be the consequence”<sup>16</sup> (Belhar). This third part includes the commitment to seek a global covenant for justice, a confession of sin and a doxology.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. The Confession of Belhar, § 5.

## V. The Cry for Life and Spiritual Renewal

26. While the presentation of the result of the Section on Spirituality does not follow the method of the two other sections, it clearly mirrors the concern for a spirituality that Leonardo Boff has described as “the wholeness of the human being as energy, meaning and vitality. In this sense the opposite to spirit is not the body, but death. Spirituality means to live according to the deep dynamics of life”<sup>17</sup>.

27. We are being “confronted by the cry for life” says the document. This is “God’s cry for life within us and within our world and God’s cry from those who live with poverty and injustice”<sup>18</sup>. We are churches “who want to engage with the struggle for justice and covenant for life”, we are churches “who want to live more gently on earth”<sup>19</sup>, we are churches “who want to care for and care about those who suffer and those who celebrate”. However, the challenge of becoming “examples of the change we are seeking” raises the question of our own understanding and practice of spirituality: “How can we sustain this struggle if we do not develop the spiritual resources that keep us connected to the cry for life from God and our neighbour?”<sup>20</sup>

28. What is it meant here by the term “spirituality”? Spirituality “seems to be something common to all peoples, a deeply rooted component of human identity” related to the search for meaning<sup>21</sup>. It is the experience of our being in Christ together” that propels us “into becoming his new creation, a community that walks the way of Christ enabled by his Spirit”. Spirituality is “our chief means to discern and hallow the presence of God breaking out in all things”; it is the gift “that gives us the capacity to struggle, celebrate and feel for others in the midst of everything we face”. It flows

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<sup>17</sup> L. Boff, *Ecologia Mundialização Espiritualidade*, São Paulo, Atica, 1996, p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> “Hearing the cry for life in our joy and our pain”, Document General Council 18-e, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> “Hearing the cry...”, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

“from all of life” and connects us to the Holy Spirit. It reveals to us “a deepening sense of the God who cares for all living things, a care we, too, are called to exercise and sustain”<sup>22</sup>. The deeper our spirituality, “the deeper our capacity to face and overcome that which is unjust, celebrate the life we have, and feel for our neighbours near and far”<sup>23</sup>.

29. However, Reformed churches have often “failed to see spirituality as wider than worship” because they have not been “open to the world beyond worship”. They find it difficult to leave worship as the fundamental expression of their spirituality. Worship, on the other hand, “often fails to address the issues of our day”, nor does it engage participants “at any deep level”. Churches issued from the Colonial mission “are still using models that reflect Europe and North America of that particular time”<sup>24</sup>. Many of them “feel overshadowed by the free style of worship offered in many Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches”. It seems that “they cannot accept lively styles of worship”<sup>25</sup>. Reformed worship often assumes that everyone “is at the same place in her or his spiritual journey”. It needs “to sit where people sit, addressing the issues and concerns of our daily lives through the rich stories and insights of our faith”. The celebration of the Eucharist should be used as a means “to exclude others from the core life and story of the church”<sup>26</sup>.

30. Moreover “our theology has emphasised the head over the heart, the mind over the body; this is a theology growing increasingly stale in the diverse cultures and environments we inhabit”<sup>27</sup>. We have not sufficiently developed and honoured “our understandings of the action of the Holy Spirit in the challenges of our day”, what life in the Spirit looks like<sup>28</sup>, we

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

are still failing in the task of making room “for the gifts and leadership of the whole priesthood of believers”<sup>29</sup>.

31. Our spirituality, the document goes on to say, “needs to be shaped by the Bible”, by our “biblical reflection on God’s life and the life of the world”. Many of us “are discovering, as if for the first time, that the Bible really is a profound resource for our spirituality”. This gives us “points of reference beyond ourselves” and prevents our spirituality from being a form of self-centredness, “a comforter at times when we need to be challenged”<sup>30</sup>.

## VI Spirituality and the Option for the Poor

32. This paper has dealt at varying levels of detail, with four different events held by four different Protestant-based church fellowships in three different continents during the four weeks that preceded the Kampen Congress on Reshaping Protestantism in a Global Context.

33. Significant language regularities, “transversal” to all of them, point out to church concerns and initiatives closely connected, I believe, with reconstruction in tomorrow’s Protestantism. They are not at all consensual within Protestantism itself, what is not surprising after all. But they are sufficiently widespread and recurrent to constitute potential theological indexes.

34. Vague, ambivalent, unclear as it might look like, “spirituality” is one of them. The WCC General Secretary dedicated the entire second part of his above mentioned address to the National Council of Churches in Korea to the future ecumenical implications of today’s young people quest for a non-institutional or non-organised spirituality. In the same vein, CLAI seeks to relate its debate on the integration to the world economic system to worship

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

renewal and AIPRAL, before and after the WARC positive appreciation of Pentecostal spirituality, has been insisting on the “spiritual” deficit of Reformed worship.

35. Another one is a conscientious or critical evangelical option for the poor. What lies in the heart of WARC’s call to a *Processus Confessionis* or “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth” as well as in its reflection on mission renewal today lies also in the heart of CLAI’s São Paulo consultation on human dignity and economic globalisation and AIPRAL’s concern for the renewal of the mission of Reformed Churches in today’s Latin America.

36. How will world Protestantism look like if churches “emancipate” themselves from the modern “mental slavery” and re-organise themselves to be communities mutually vulnerable that sing together, never alone, “redemption songs” that nurture wholeness in the heart of the ecological resistance to materialism, systemic poverty and hopelessness?